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Posted on Mon, Jun. 20, 2005

Chemical Plant Safety

Editorial | Congress must step up

After more than three years of hoping for the best, the Bush administration has finally admitted that it can't depend on private industry to protect Americans from terrorism.

Homeland Security Undersecretary Robert Stephan told Congress last week that, despite some progress in fortifying the nation's 15,000 chemical factories, refineries and water-treatment plants, industry's voluntary measures "alone will not sufficiently address security for the entire sector."

Congress should take that as a green light to pass federal safety standards for industry, similar to the oversight of airports and nuclear power plants. Senate Homeland Security Committee members Susan Collins (R., Maine) and Joseph Lieberman (D., Conn.) should get moving with a promised bill.

The Environmental Protection Agency warns that an attack on any of America's 123 urban plants could endanger millions of people and result in tens of thousands of deaths. That's why Sen. Jon Corzine (D., N.J.) has been at the forefront pushing to upgrade security since October 2001.

Key cabinet members initially supported federal regulation, but they backed off under the pressure of industry lobbying and White House urging.

Industry promised it could police itself. Yet media reports as recent as this spring have revealed easy access to facilities across the United States that use or store volatile chemicals.

A Government Accountability Office report found that only 7 percent of the plants that handle large amounts of dangerous chemicals are known to participate in the voluntary program. That statistic makes you feel really safe, doesn't it? Impatient for improvement, Maryland and New York enacted their own regulations, and other states may follow. Trade groups now agree that uniform federal rules would be better than a patchwork of state laws.

Addressing a related problem, California banned the sale of .50 caliber rifles as of Jan. 1. The guns' range and armor-piercing capability threaten petrochemical and chemical production, storage and transportation facilities. New Jersey should pass a similar bill, sponsored by Sen. John Adler (D., Camden).

Laws cannot stop terrorists, but they can help the United States reduce risk through adequate precaution. Congress must make chemical plants safer.

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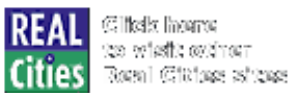


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